
Normalising paternal mental illness

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Here Louis Dunn from Bluebell Care describes his experiences of perinatal mental illness and how people with lived experience can help to ‘normalise’ mental illness.

[Bluebell](#) is a growing charity based in Bristol supporting mums, dads and families who are affected by antenatal or postnatal depression and anxiety. I lead their emotional support service for new dads, which is called Dads in Mind. My role is to offer peer support via telephone and text, one to one meetings and group meet ups. I have also recently been promoting the Dads in Mind service through talking about my own journey with perinatal illness in media outlets, including print and film interviews.

Now is a good time to reflect, as it’s been nearly a year since the [Dads in Mind](#) service launched. One of the things that has been most successful has been offering peer support to dads. I have been thinking about why this is successful. I remember finding being listened to in a non-judgmental manner really helpful myself when I was unwell. This meant

whoever was listening to me was just listening. They were reflecting on what I was saying without offering SOLUTIONS to my problem. They didn't need to be a mental health expert, only to be thoughtful about their own experience and to try to point me in the right direction. I think this can be a difficult balance to find, as it is easy to retain focus on what worked for you and to then to try and help the person in front of you by telling 'your story'. I don't think true empathy works like this, instead it is just saying "I get it", "I understand", "that must be really difficult". To just acknowledge that somebody is finding it tough at the moment is often enough. Peer support can often be really effective in this way. Somebody who has lived experience of their own, but isn't necessarily a mental health professional, can have great people skills, listening skills and be able to relate to you on a human level, dad to dad. I refer to this as 'normalisation'. Normalisation of an issue like paternal mental illness can help those who are currently experiencing it, to feel more normal, less isolated and more able to talk about their own experiences and to seek help.

I believe that normalisation can also be achieved by reaching a wider audience and broadening their understanding of the experience of paternal mental illness. I have been striving to achieve this in a variety of ways. By doing presentations, taking part in films and sharing my own story in print, I have shared my personal journey. Alongside contributing a dad's perspective to the Mothers and Babies in Mind project through speaking at a masterclass and writing this blog, I also took part in the Freedom of Mind festival which recently took place in Bristol. I've also shared my experience and talked about my role with a group of midwives. Most of the attendees at the events where I've spoken have been health professionals and, while it's been a great opportunity to give them further insight into a father's mental health, this has made me think about the wider audience too. Wouldn't it be great to reach even more people? That's where the power of the media comes in.

Not long ago I was interviewed by a journalist about my personal journey for the Sunday Mirror. Although I was dubious about this at first, I decided that if it helped just one other family currently experiencing perinatal illness, it was worth it. In the end the article was fine although the headlines were sensationalist. I initially felt quite exposed (there were pictures of me and my family not only in the paper but online too) but the response it generated was generally positive, so, in the end I felt it was really worth doing. I hoped it helped people struggling to realize they weren't alone. My hope was also that it would break some of the continued stigma surrounding men's mental health.

The piece of 'normalisation' I am most proud of is this short film made by the Wellcome Trust for the BBC's Tomorrow's World programme strand.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zwgw4qt>. It was short and to the point but very sensitively done. Upon reflection I think that the Tomorrow's World film is more powerful than the Mirror article but I doubt it reached as many people. I'd love to see it shared more widely. To summarize, I think that there are a variety of ways to normalise things. What worked for me was somebody with lived experience offering a listening ear. If I had had or seen an article

or film – such as either of these – maybe I wouldn't have felt so alone and would have felt more 'normal'.

Maybe, if you're feeling ready, you'd like to share your story? We would love to hear from you!

Please email: louis@dadsinmind.org

Facebook: facebook.com/dadsinmind

Dads in Mind is a project run by Bluebell Care Trust, funded by the Rayne Foundation, the Big Lottery and Comic Relief.

Explore our MABIM tools for leaders working in perinatal mental health: www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/mumsandbabiesinmind/mabim-tools

Mums and Babies in Mind supports local leaders in four areas of England to improve care and quality of life for mums with mental health problems during pregnancy and the first year of life, and their babies.

Read more from the [Mums and Babies in Mind blog](#)

- [18/10/17 Supporting positive conversations about feeding choice and mental health in the perinatal period](#)
- [5/10/17 'Inspiring and full of innovative buzz' the first Maternal Mental Health Alliance Conference](#)
- [10/8/17 The role of a Liaison Psychiatrist in perinatal mental health](#)
- [2/8/17 I'm ready to thrive not just survive](#)
- [20/7/17 Priority setting in local services with use of the MABIM mapping tool](#)
- [19/6/17 Putting Fathers in the Picture](#)